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ARTICLE

Negative to-Infinitives: Patterns of Grammatical Preference

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how native English speakers and Korean learners of English use the negative to-infinitive forms *not to* and *to not* in formal writing and informal speech. The analysis focused on three aspects: overall frequency of each form, variation across modalities, and differences between the two speaker groups. Results show that native speakers adjust their grammatical choices according to context, using *not to* predominantly in writing while increasing their use of *to not* in speech, particularly in informal situations. In contrast, Korean learners exhibited a strong preference for *not to* across both writing and speech, with little variation between modalities. Even in informal spoken contexts, the use of *to not* was extremely limited. This consistent reliance on *not to* indicates a tendency to prioritize formally taught grammatical rules over context-sensitive variation. The results point to a gap in learners' ability to adjust their language use to suit different communicative situations, likely stemming from the dominance of prescriptive grammar instruction and limited exposure to informal spoken English. The findings reveal a marked contrast between native speakers' context-driven grammatical choices and the relatively fixed usage patterns of Korean learners. These differences highlight the importance of fostering grammatical adaptability through instruction that emphasizes not only accuracy but also contextual appropriateness and variation. A balanced approach to grammar teaching—one that includes explicit awareness of register and the range of acceptable forms—may help learners develop more flexible and natural patterns of English use.

Keywords: Negative to-Infinitive; Split Infinitive; L2 English Learner; Prescriptive Grammar; Descriptive Grammar

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1. Introduction

In English grammar, the use of the negative to-infinitive presents a unique area of study, particularly in understanding how speakers of different linguistic backgrounds navigate the choice between *not to* and *to not*. Traditionally, *not to* has been viewed as the more standard and prescriptive form, especially in formal writing. However, the acceptance of split infinitives—where *not* is placed between *to* and the verb—has grown in modern English usage, with *to not* becoming increasingly common in informal contexts. This evolving trend has led to differences in grammatical preferences based on educational and cultural backgrounds.

This study explores the usage patterns of *not to* and *to not* among two distinct groups: American college students and Korean college students. The comparison highlights not only the grammatical preferences of native English speakers but also the influence of English education systems in non-native contexts, where prescriptive grammar rules tend to be emphasized. In Korea, traditional English education focuses on strict adherence to rules, often discouraging the use of split infinitives. As a result, *not to* is overwhelmingly taught as the correct form, while *to not* is often avoided.

In contrast, native English speakers, particularly in the United States, demonstrate greater flexibility in their use of infinitives. American college students may still prefer *not to* in formal writing, but the frequency of *to not* in informal settings suggests a shift toward a more descriptive and adaptable approach to language use. This divergence in grammatical choices raises important questions about the role of prescriptive versus descriptive grammar in language learning and usage.

The present study analyzes total 800 sentences from both American and Korean college students to determine how often *not to* and *to not* are used in spoken and written contexts. By conducting statistical comparisons and measuring the strength of association between the two groups, this research aims to provide insights into the impact of educational background on grammatical preferences and the implications for language teaching. Here are the research questions this study aims to explore:

Research Question 1: How does the usage of *not to* and *to not* differ between formal writing and informal speech within native English speakers and Korean learners of English?

Research Question 2: What are the significant differences in the usage of *not to* and *not to* between native English speakers and Korean learners in both written and spoken contexts?

Research Question 3: How much flexibility is observed in the usage of *not to* and *not to* between written and spoken contexts for native English speakers compared to Korean learners?

2. Literature Review

The debate surrounding the use of negative to-infinitives, particularly the forms *not to* and *to not*, has long been a topic of interest in linguistic research. This discussion is deeply rooted in the broader divide between prescriptive and descriptive grammar approaches, both of which play a crucial role in how speakers and learners of English navigate language usage [1]. Traditionally, the prescriptive rule has favored *not to* as the grammatically correct form, while *to not* was considered a violation of the infinitive structure. However, linguistic studies have shown that the use of split infinitives, such as *to not*, is becoming more common in both spoken and written English [2].

2.1. Prescriptive versus Descriptive Grammar

The influence of prescriptive grammar on English learners, particularly those from non-native English-speaking countries, is well documented. In Korean education systems, where traditional grammar rules are heavily emphasized, *not to* is strictly taught as the correct form, while split infinitives are generally discouraged [3]. This is reflected in the widespread preference for *not to* among Korean learners of English, as highlighted in studies of Korean English education [4]. Research indicates that such prescriptive approaches may limit learners' linguistic flexibility, resulting in a reluctance to adopt more fluid and modern grammatical forms like *to not* [4].

In contrast, native English speakers, particularly in countries like the United States, demonstrate greater flexibility in their use of grammar, as the focus in education tends to shift toward descriptive grammar, which reflects actual language use rather than strict adherence to traditional rules [5]. Research by Calle-Martín and Miranda-García shows that American students are more likely to use *to not* in informal

contexts, where split infinitives are widely accepted and even preferred in some cases for clarity or emphasis [2]. Such evidence aligns with a broader trend toward greater grammatical flexibility across various forms of English, further reinforcing the idea that prescriptive grammar rules may no longer fit with modern usage patterns [2, 6, 7].

2.2. Split Infinitives in Modern English

The use of split infinitives has been a contentious issue in English grammar for centuries, with the earliest debates dating back to the 19th century. The traditional rule of avoiding split infinitives, such as *to not*, originated in attempts to make English conform to Latin grammar structures, where splitting an infinitive is impossible due to its single-word form [8]. However, modern linguists argue that such rules are outdated and do not reflect the natural evolution of the English language [9].

Lots of studies have focused on the frequency and acceptability of split infinitives in contemporary English. For example, McEnery conducted a large-scale analysis of written and spoken English and found that while *not to* remains more common in formal writing, *to not* is frequently used in spoken English, particularly in informal settings [10]. This trend is supported by corpus-based studies, which show that split infinitives have become increasingly accepted in both American and British English [11].

Research continues to confirm the growing acceptance of split infinitives, especially in informal contexts. Calle-Martin and Miranda-García found that split infinitives are more frequently used in American English, particularly in spoken and informal registers, whereas British English continues to be slightly more conservative [2]. This difference is often attributed to the more prescriptive approach to grammar traditionally emphasized in British education, as opposed to the descriptive tendencies prevalent in American linguistic practices [10]. In addition, the historical influence of Latin grammar on British English norms, which discouraged split infinitives, has played a role in this divergence [11]. McEnery highlights the increased usage of split infinitives in academic writing, particularly in American corpora, showing that this once frowned-upon structure is now gaining widespread acceptance even in formal contexts [10]. This shift suggests that adherence to older prescriptive norms is gradually giving way to a more descriptive understanding of grammar, based on real-world usage [2, 7].

2.3. Cross-Cultural Differences in Grammar Usage

Cross-cultural studies of English usage have highlighted significant differences in how grammar rules are applied by native and non-native speakers. Pyun conducted a comparative study of Korean and American college students' writing and found that Korean students overwhelmingly favored *not to*, reflecting the prescriptive nature of their English education [12]. In contrast, American students exhibited a more balanced use of *not to* and *to not*, particularly in less formal contexts.

This difference has also been discussed in previous research, including the work of Lee et al., who examined English essays written by L1-English and ESL students in U.S. universities [13]. Their study, which focused on informal language use in academic writing, found that while both groups relied on similar informal elements, ESL students generally adhered more strictly to prescriptive grammar norms, whereas L1-English writers adopted a more flexible approach. Specifically, ESL students used a narrower range of informal features and tended to follow traditional grammar rules more closely, whereas L1-English writers were more likely to incorporate informal elements that have become relatively legitimized in academic writing. This suggests that differences in grammatical flexibility, including the use of split infinitives like *to not*, may be influenced by broader patterns of adherence to prescriptive norms in L2 writing. ESL learners' tendency to follow stricter grammatical conventions could explain their lower usage of *to not*, as observed in this study. In contrast, native speakers' more liberal approach to informal structures aligns with their greater acceptance of *to not*, particularly in contexts where it enhances sentence flow or emphasis.

Some studies further confirm these cross-cultural differences in grammatical usage [14, 15]. Gonzales and Dita analyzed the use of informal language in academic writing across 12 varieties of World Englishes [14]. Using data from the International Corpus of English, their findings revealed that while both Inner Circle and Outer Circle English users employ similar informal elements, notable differences also emerge. Their study found that Outer Circle English users tend to adhere more strictly to prescriptive grammar norms

influenced by their first language (L1), whereas Inner Circle English users demonstrate greater grammatical flexibility, incorporating informal features that have become increasingly legitimized in academic writing. This suggests that while prescriptive norms remain a strong influence in Outer Circle Englishes, independent grammatical developments also occur as part of an ongoing nativization process.

These findings indicate that the influence of prescriptive grammar extends beyond specific grammatical rules, shaping broader patterns of grammatical flexibility and linguistic choices. This perspective can also be applied to the use of split infinitives. The tendency of Outer Circle English users to avoid split infinitives (*to not*) may be closely tied to their overall adherence to prescriptive grammar, while the greater flexibility observed among Inner Circle English users may reflect a more descriptive, usage-based approach to grammar education. Thus, differences in split infinitive usage are not merely a matter of rule adherence but rather a reflection of how linguistic environments and grammatical instruction shape users' grammatical choices.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

This study draws on four main datasets: two from native English speakers and two from Korean learners of English. Each group consists of 200 samples of written language and 200 samples of spoken language, providing a balanced dataset for comparison.

Native Group

The data for both the written and spoken native group samples were sourced from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), ensuring the authenticity of language usage across both formal and informal contexts. COCA is one of the largest and most representative corpora of contemporary American English, containing over one billion words from diverse sources, including fiction, newspapers, academic texts, and spoken conversations. This extensive coverage allows for a comprehensive analysis of natural language patterns in both written and spoken modalities.

Korean Group

The Korean group data were sourced from the Incheon National University Multi-language Korean Learner Corpus (MULC), which includes both written essays and spoken interactions[16]. The written data consist of essays produced by university students in South Korea. The spoken data include both two-minute monologues and 20-minute group conversations. Speaking proficiency was also assessed using CEFR-based rubrics. This balanced dataset enables a comparative analysis of written and spoken language use among Korean learners of English.

This comprehensive dataset allows for an in-depth comparison of negative to-infinitive usage (e.g., *not to* vs. *to not*) across different modalities (written and spoken) within and between the two groups.

3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in three stages to systematically compare the usage of *not to* and *to not* across different groups and language modalities.

Within-group Comparison

For each group (native and Korean), occurrences of *not to* and *to not* were analyzed separately in written and spoken language. This approach allowed for an examination of how negative to-infinitives are distributed within each group, highlighting differences between formal writing and informal speech. Since prescriptive grammar traditionally favors *not to*, the analysis sought to determine whether written language in both groups exhibited a stronger preference for this form compared to spoken language, where more flexible, descriptive grammar tendencies might emerge.

Between-group Comparison

To identify broader patterns, the results from the native and Korean groups were compared across both spoken and written contexts. This stage focused on detecting statistically significant differences between the two groups in their choice of negative to-infinitives. Particular attention was given to whether Korean learners, who are often influenced by explicit grammar instruction, displayed a stronger adherence to prescriptive norms than native speakers, who may rely more on intuitive language use. The comparison aimed to assess whether the Korean group's grammatical choices were shaped more by L1 transfer, prescriptive grammar instruction, or a lack of exposure to naturalistic English input.

Comparison of Usage Gaps

A key component of the analysis involved measuring the gap between written and spoken usage within each group.

This comparison helped determine how flexible each group was in their use of negative to-infinitives across different registers. If native speakers exhibited a smaller gap, it would suggest greater adaptability to context-dependent variations in grammar. Conversely, if Korean learners displayed a more rigid adherence to one form over another, it could indicate stronger prescriptive influences and limited exposure to natural spoken usage. By comparing the magnitude of this usage gap between the two groups, the study aimed to assess whether native speakers demonstrated a more balanced approach in switching between formal and informal contexts compared to Korean learners.

3.3. Statistical Methods

To assess the statistical significance of differences in negative to-infinitive usage, chi-squared tests were conducted across the four datasets (native spoken, native written, Korean spoken, Korean written). Each pair of datasets (e.g., native spoken vs. native written, Korean spoken vs. Korean written) was tested for significant differences, allowing for a detailed evaluation of whether usage patterns were consistent across modalities or varied significantly within and between groups.

Additionally, Cramér's V was calculated to measure the strength of association between each group's preference for *not to* and *to not*. This provided insight into whether the differences between spoken and written preferences were merely statistically significant or also practically meaningful. The study further explored the relative size of the usage gap between spoken and written English within each group, comparing the extent to which native speakers and Korean learners adjusted their negative to-infinitive usage depending on context.

4. Results

4.1. Comparison of Native Group: Written vs. Spoken

The analysis of 200 written and 200 spoken samples from native English speakers revealed significant differences in the usage of negative to-infinitives between formal writing and informal speech.

In the written dataset, *not to* was overwhelmingly preferred, appearing in 78% of cases (156 instances), while *to not* appeared in only 22% of cases (44 instances) as in the **Figure 1** below. This aligns with traditional prescriptive grammar rules, where *not to* is more commonly accepted in formal contexts.

In contrast, in the spoken dataset, the use of *to not* increased significantly, accounting for 42% of the cases (84 instances), while *not to* still held the majority at 58% (116 instances). This suggests that native speakers exhibit greater flexibility in informal spoken contexts, where split infinitives like *to not* are more likely to occur. The chi-squared test revealed a significant difference between written and spoken usage ($p < 0.001$), confirming that native speakers adjust their grammatical preferences depending on the formality of the context.

Furthermore, a qualitative examination of the spoken data suggests that the use of *to not* often occurred in conversational or emphatic contexts, where the split infinitive helped emphasize the negation (e.g., "I told him *to not* do that!"). In contrast, in more structured speech (e.g., prepared speeches or presentations), *not to* remained the dominant choice, indicating that even in spoken English, the level of formality influences negative to-infinitive selection.

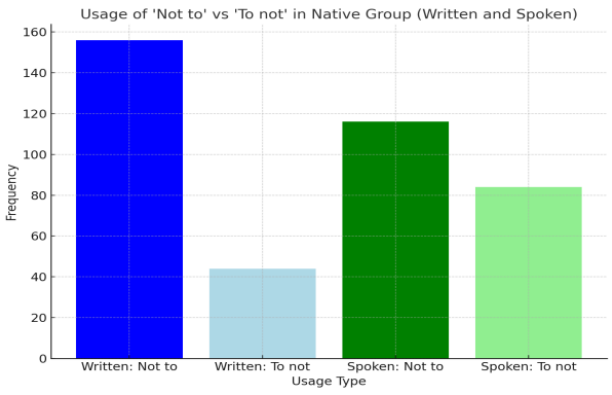

Figure 1. Usage of *not to* vs. *to not* in Native Group (Written & Spoken).

4.2. Comparison of Korean Group: Written vs. Spoken

In the Korean group, the preference for *not to* was even more pronounced across both written and spoken datasets. In the written dataset, *not to* appeared in 96% of cases (192 instances), while *to not* was found in only 4% of cases (8 instances) as shown in the **Figure 2**.

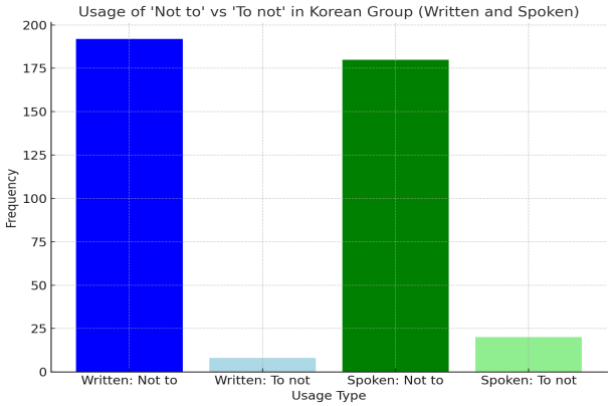

Figure 2. Usage of *not to* vs. *to not* in Korean Group (Written & Spoken).

This strong preference for *not to* reflects the influence of prescriptive grammar teaching in Korean education, where split infinitives are discouraged.

In the spoken dataset, while the use of *to not* slightly increased, it remained low at 10% (20 instances), with *not to* accounting for 90% of cases (180 instances). The difference between written and spoken usage in the Korean group was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), but the gap was much smaller compared to the native group. This indicates that Korean learners of English tend to adhere to prescriptive grammar rules even in informal spoken contexts

A closer examination of the Korean learners' spoken data revealed that even when *to not* was used, it tended to occur in formulaic expressions or instances where learners directly translated from their native language, rather than as a result of grammatical flexibility. Additionally, hesitation markers (e.g., uh, um, I mean,) frequently preceded *to not*, suggesting that learners may have been uncertain about using the split infinitive form.

4.3. Comparison between Native and Korean Groups

When comparing the native and Korean groups, the usage of *not to* vs. *to not* revealed clear differences in grammatical flexibility. Native speakers showed a much wider usage gap between written and spoken contexts, with *to not* being used more frequently in speech. In contrast, Korean learners maintained a strong preference for *not to* across both contexts, demonstrating a greater adherence to prescriptive grammar rules.

The chi-squared test comparing the two groups showed a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the native and Korean groups differ in their use of negative to-infinitives. Furthermore, Cramér's V indicated a moderate association (0.27), suggesting that the differences in usage patterns are meaningful and likely influenced by educational background and language exposure (**Figure 3**).

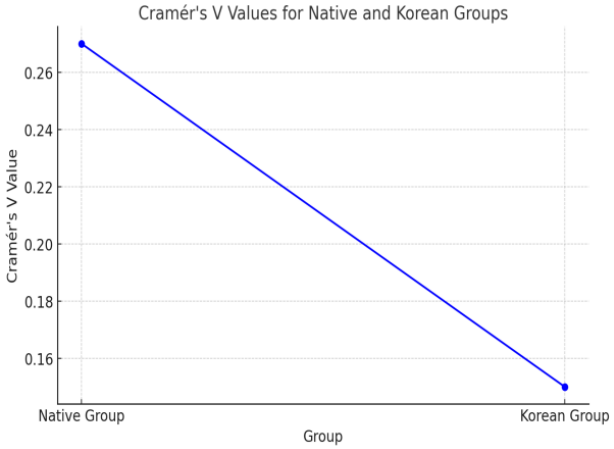

Figure 3. Cramér's V: Strength of Association between Written and Spoken Usage.

Notably, even in spoken English, Korean learners displayed a strong preference for prescriptive norms, while native speakers exhibited greater adaptability depending on context. This finding suggests that Korean learners may require explicit instruction on register-dependent grammar usage, as their exposure to informal and naturally occurring spoken English is often limited in formal education settings.

4.4. Analysis of Usage Gaps

One of the key findings of the study was the usage gap between written and spoken contexts within each group. In the native group, the gap was substantial, with the use of *to not* increasing by 20 percentage points in spoken language compared to written language. This reflects the native speakers' ability to adapt their language use based on context and the relative acceptance of split infinitives in informal speech.

In contrast, the Korean group exhibited a much smaller usage gap, with only a 6 percentage point increase in the use of *to not* in spoken language compared to written language. This suggests that Korean learners of English may be less comfortable with the flexibility of informal grammatical structures, likely due to the prescriptive nature of their English education.

Additionally, the effect size of the usage gap differed significantly between the two groups. The native speakers' greater variability suggests a more natural ability to adjust grammar according to context, while the Korean learners' smaller shift indicates a more rigid adherence to grammatical norms, even when formality is reduced. This highlights the need for further investigation into whether increased exposure to informal English or targeted pedagogical interventions could help L2 learners develop greater flexibility in their use of negative to-infinitives.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study have significant implications for English language teaching, particularly for non-native speakers. In countries like Korea, where grammar instruction is often prescriptive, learners may benefit from a shift toward more descriptive approaches that reflect actual language usage.

Descriptive approaches focus on analyzing and understanding how language is naturally used in real-life contexts, rather than adhering strictly to prescribed grammatical rules. This means that rather than discouraging forms like *to not*, language instruction should provide ample exposure to how both *not to* and *to not* are used in various registers. Incorporating corpus-based materials, authentic spoken transcripts, and discourse-level grammar instruction may help learners better understand how grammatical choices shift across different communicative situations. By encouraging learners to use both *not to* and *to not* in appropriate situations, educators could enhance their communicative competence and adaptability. This is particularly relevant as split infinitives are becoming increasingly accepted in modern English, especially in informal and conversational contexts.

As DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman suggest, effective grammar instruction should balance prescriptive knowledge with an awareness of actual language usage[17]. This means shifting away from a rigid, rule-based approach toward an exploratory model of grammar teaching, where students analyze real-world data, identify patterns, and develop a deeper understanding of grammatical flexibility. Studies in second language pragmatics[11, 13, 14] have shown that explicit exposure to variable grammatical patterns leads to greater linguistic awareness and adaptability in L2 learners. This aligns with research on interlanguage development, which suggests that exposure to authentic language input is crucial in enabling learners to restructure their grammatical systems toward more native-like proficiency[18, 19]. Without this exposure, learners may fossilize in prescriptively reinforced patterns, limiting their ability to adapt to informal registers.

However, the challenge lies in balancing grammatical correctness with the realities of contemporary English usage. Non-native learners, particularly in prescriptive grammar environments like Korea, may feel uncomfortable using split infinitives due to their formal education. Lee et al. notes that these learners often struggle with informal structures, emphasizing the importance of gradually exposing students to real-world language usage, including the use of *to not* where appropriate[13].

For Korean learners, the strong preference for *not to* across both written and spoken data suggests limited exposure to informal English. Given that most formal education settings emphasize written grammar over spoken fluency, learners may develop an imbalanced grammatical competence, favoring prescriptive structures over context-driven choices. This phenomenon is consistent with previous research on input-driven language acquisition[20], which highlights that L2 learners' grammatical flexibility is heavily influenced by the type of input they receive. Additionally, studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition indicate that when classroom instruction heavily favors written grammar, learners struggle to acquire features of natural spoken discourse, such as hesitation markers, contractions, and register-appropriate grammatical variations[21].

To increase familiarity with flexible grammatical structures, learners should be encouraged to engage with a wider variety of English input sources, including spoken corpora, informal conversations, and interactive discourse-based activities. Additionally, task-based learning and form-focused instruction[22] can provide controlled opportunities for learners to experiment with different grammatical structures in communicative settings, gradually reducing their reliance on prescriptive forms.

For native speakers, this study reaffirms the importance of understanding both prescriptive and descriptive grammar. While *not to* remains the preferred form in formal writing, educators should ensure that students are aware that *to not* is acceptable in informal settings and can sometimes offer greater

clarity or emphasis. The variation between these forms also highlights the importance of register awareness, where speakers adjust their language use according to formality, audience, and communicative purpose. Studies in sociolinguistics have demonstrated that native speakers unconsciously shift between prescriptive and descriptive grammar depending on the context, yet L2 learners may require explicit training in recognizing and applying these distinctions [23–26]. By fostering an explicit awareness of the distinction between formal and informal contexts, native speakers can become more proficient in adjusting their grammatical choices depending on the communicative demands of different situations.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated (1) how native English speakers and Korean learners of English use *not to* and *to not* in formal writing and informal speech, (2) the significant differences between the two groups in written and spoken contexts, and (3) the degree of flexibility observed in their usage of *not to* and *to not* across different modalities.

The findings revealed that native speakers exhibit greater grammatical flexibility, adjusting their usage of *not to* and *to not* based on context. Specifically, while native speakers predominantly use *not to* in formal writing, they demonstrate a notable increase in the use of *to not* in spoken discourse, particularly in informal settings. This suggests that native speakers naturally modify their grammatical choices depending on communicative context and register.

In contrast, Korean learners overwhelmingly favor *not to* in both written and spoken English, with little variation between modalities. Even in speech, where greater flexibility might be expected, they continue to adhere to prescriptive grammar rules. This finding highlights the strong influence of traditional grammar instruction in Korea, which prioritizes rule-based accuracy over contextual adaptation. The results suggest that Korean learners may lack sufficient exposure to the natural variation in native English usage, particularly in spoken contexts where *to not* is more commonly accepted.

The findings underscore the need to balance prescriptive grammar instruction with exposure to descriptive and discourse-level grammar in English language education. In particular, corpus-based learning, speech-focused instruction, and task-based learning (TBL) could be effective in helping learners develop a more natural and flexible command of English grammar. By integrating real-world linguistic input into the classroom, learners can gain a deeper understanding of grammatical variation and develop the ability to adjust their language use according to context.

Future research could further explore comparative studies across different learner groups, investigate instructional methods that facilitate grammatical flexibility, and analyze the role of input types in shaping learners' grammatical choices. Additionally, incorporating informal conversational data and real-world speech samples would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how learners use negative to-infinitives in spontaneous discourse.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of moving beyond rigid grammar instruction and fostering a more adaptive approach to grammar teaching. English language education should aim not only to teach grammatical accuracy but also to equip learners with the ability to navigate different linguistic contexts with confidence. Achieving this balance will require a shift toward integrating formal instruction with authentic spoken input, ensuring that learners develop the grammatical flexibility necessary for real-world communication.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.-G.K. and S.P.; methodology, M.-G.K.; formal analysis, T.K.; investigation, T.K.; data curation, T.K.; writing—original draft preparation, M.-G.K.; writing—review and editing, T.K. and S.P.; supervision, S.P.; project administration, S.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The data used in this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Incheon National University (IRB number: 7007971-201807-007A) under the authorization of the INU-MULC team.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are from the publicly accessible INU-MULC corpus (https://inu-mulc.inu.ac.kr). Access to some portions may be restricted due to licensing agreements.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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